

THE FLINT RIVER BASIN: UNFINISHED PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT

The development of the Apalachicola, Chattahoochee, Flint Rivers basin began in the late 18th Century and continued through the mid 1950s. During these roughly 150 years, many improvement projects for navigation, flood control and power generation were proposed for the Flint River basin, but few were ever funded or completed. The exception was the Jim Woodruff Dam Project, just below the confluence of the Chattahoochee and the Flint Rivers, to provide navigation to Bainbridge. The last major successful development was the West Point Dam and Reservoir on the Chattahoochee River. The last major development effort was the Spewrell Bluff project on the Flint River, but it fell victim to a combination of the increasingly higher environmental priorities and the policy decisions of then Governor Carter and the newly created Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Since that time, most development and management proposals for the Flint River basin have been abandoned or, more adversely, sacrificed to budget cuts, drought management policies and environmental concerns. Navigation performance was never fully provided or maintained on the Apalachicola or the lower Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers. Flood reduction programs were not seriously pursued, and by the late 1980s, the drought management policies had set a precedent of sacrificing the occasional navigation needs to upstream municipal and industrial water supply needs and to maintaining additional flows to the Apalachicola Bay and Estuary.

The current Tri-Rivers ACF Allocation Study (1991-97) completely ignores the traditional priority given to flood damage reduction needs on the Flint, even in face of substantial flood damages suffered while the study was underway. This study added an element of uncertainty and dubious validity in terms of the traditional water management roles so well defined for the Corps of Engineers, by adding agricultural demands and

groundwater considerations, both areas in which project managers and databases for the region were inadequate.

Given that the Flint River basin serves the largest and most productive system of irrigated agriculture in the state, we should somehow organize the mutual interests of all economic, social and environmental sectors of the basin to develop and manage the water resources for the optimum benefit of this rather well-defined and unique surface and groundwater system. This effort may include pressure for tributary reservoirs and management policies that provide needed water controls for improved flood control and drought assistance in the basin. Under enlightened management, this basin could be improved to serve related needs such as municipal and industrial water demands, recreational and environmental enhancements that have long been proposed but never implemented. Perhaps the most essential need for the future basin interests is to avoid allocations of water in the Apalachicola and Chattahoochee portions of the ACF basins that might be adverse to the extensive lands and resources drained and watered by the Flint River, a truly Georgia resources from beginning to end.